



Ensuring Internet Access During a Pandemic: Piloting a Wifi Hotspot Lending Program

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Abstract

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 many students experienced sudden lifestyle adjustments. These adjustments included not having reliable access to an internet source to complete their coursework. In an effort to soften the pandemic's blow the library secured a grant to purchase, manage, and circulate mobile wifi hotspots to students in need. For the pilot eleven hotspots were purchased for one campus, and due to the success of the pilot now all three campuses of PCOM are loaning out a total of twenty-eight hotspots.

Timeline

- March 2020: Due to COVID-19 all three campuses switched to completely online learning and virtual work setting
- July 2020: Grant is submitted and approved by the National Network of the Library of Medicine (NNLM), a unit of the National Institute of Health (NIH)
- October 2020: Eleven hotspots purchased for Suwannee campus
- October 2020-November 2020: Hotspots are cataloged and survey is created in RedCap to gauge student interest and need
- November 2020: Hotspots are circulated to qualified students
- February 2021: Seventeen hotspots are purchased and cataloged for Philadelphia and Moultrie campuses, hotspots in Suwannee are returned. Decision made to continue hotspot lending program beyond duration of the grant
- March 2021: Second survey is sent to students to gauge interest and need. Devices begin circulating on all three campuses

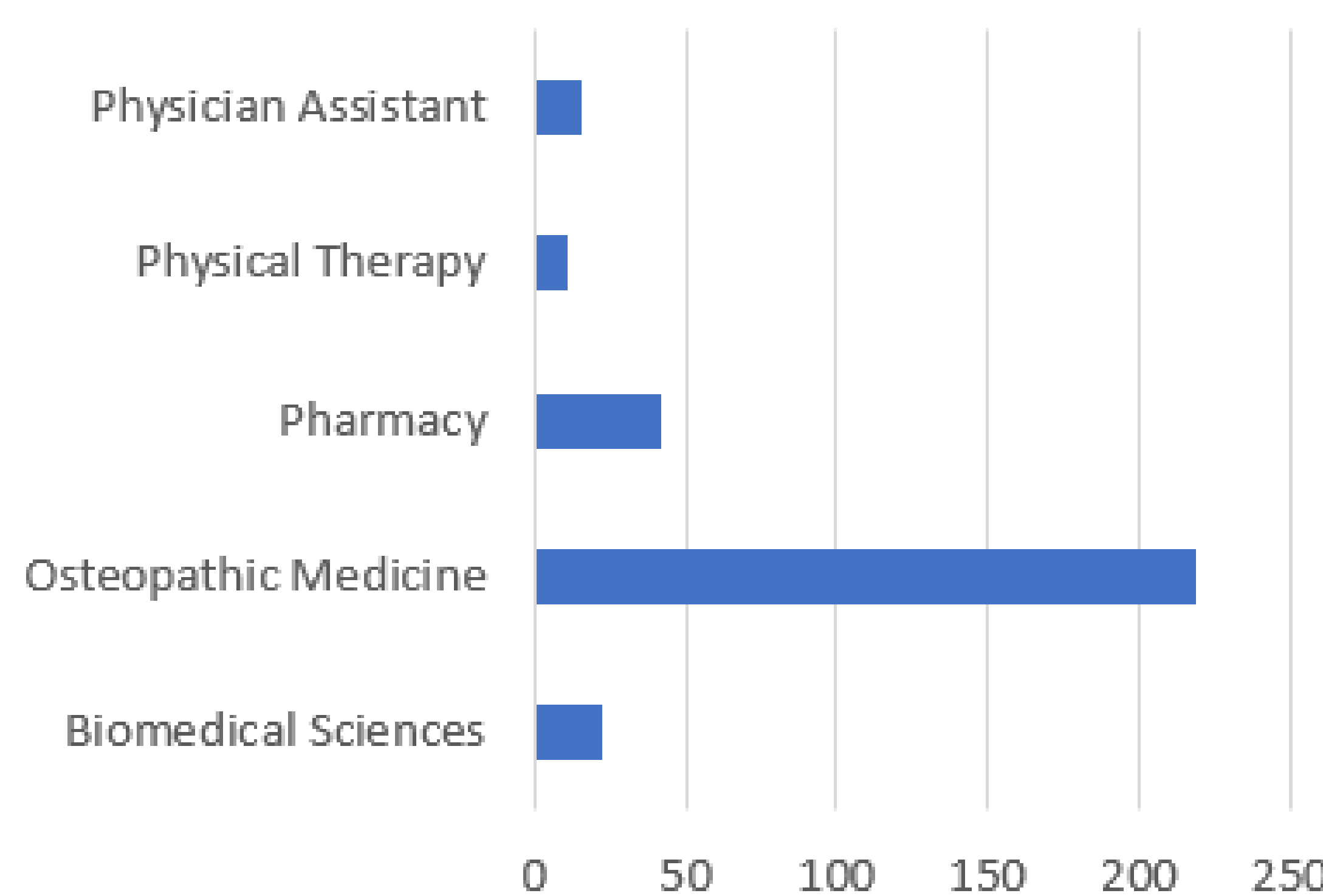
Grant Process

As the pandemic continued into the summer of 2020 students were now consistently required to complete their coursework online, which made access to stable internet a must. A decision was made to help financially disadvantaged students maintain access to a stable internet connection. Public libraries already offer hotspots, so we brought their idea to an academic setting. The library's Associate Director of Operations & Assessment completed a grant from the NNLM to pilot the hotspot program. The evaluation of the grant would be handled by the Associate Director of Education & Engagement.

Preparing for Circulation

- The Suwannee campus purchased eleven hotspots from Tech Soup and cell service is provided by MobileBeacon
- The library purchased carrying cases for the devices
- Our Public Services Coordinator cataloged and processed the devices while also setting up parameters in our ILS, Voyager. The loan period would be for the academic term

What program are you in?



- A survey was created by our Scholarly Communications & Research Librarian via RedCap to help gauge interest and need
- 313 students (from all campuses) responded to the initial survey
- Eligible students were chosen based on answers, including whether or not they had reliable internet access and if they had suffered some financial hardships due to the pandemic

Mobile Hotspot Survey

Please complete the survey below.

Thank you!

Name:

PCOM email address:

What program are you in?

Osteopathic Medicine
 Pharmacy
 Biomedical Sciences
 Physical Therapy
 Physician Assistant
 Other Department

What campus are you on?

Philadelphia
 Georgia
 South Georgia

Do you have access to reliable Internet?

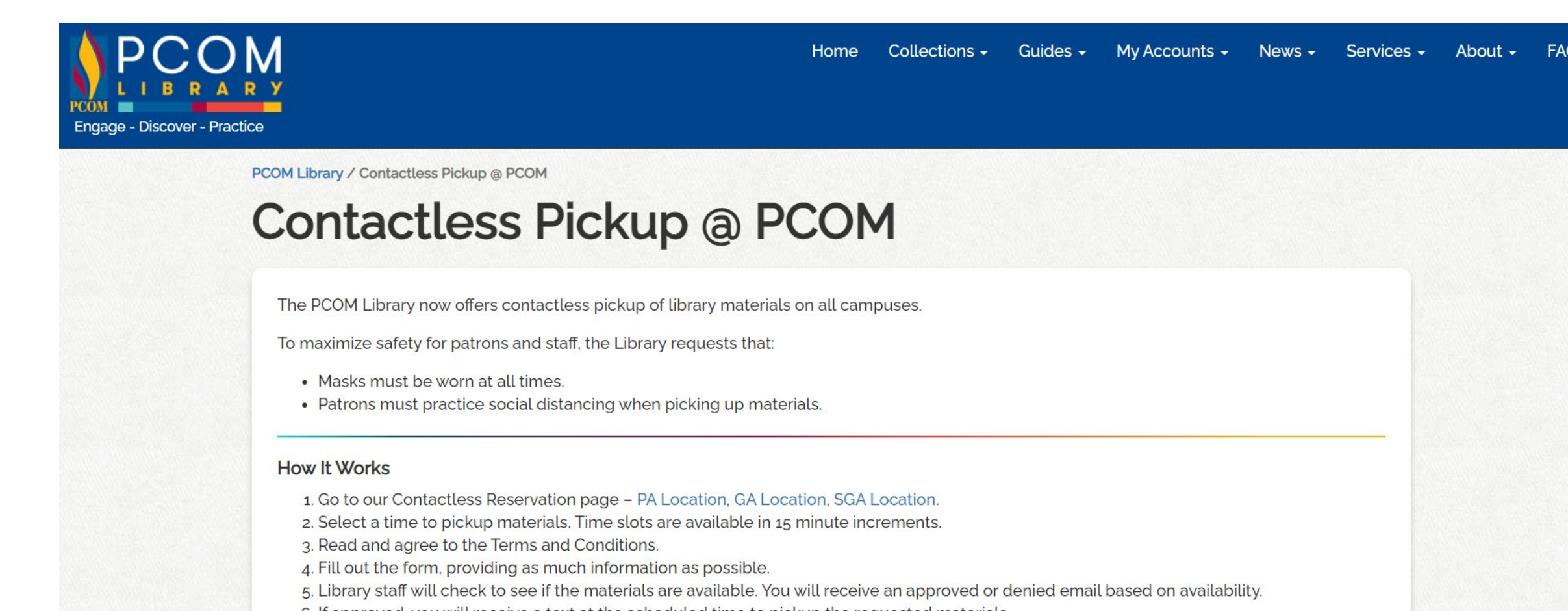
Yes
 No

Has the COVID-19 pandemic inflicted financial hardship on you making it difficult to afford Internet access?

Yes
 No

Circulation

- Hotspots were checked out via the library's contactless pickup reservation system, hosted by Springshare's LibCal software
- Students would reserve a time online, fill out and return a borrower's agreement and then pickup the hotspot on campus



- Two reminder emails were sent out near the due date. Students had the option of dropping off the hotspots either in-person or via library drop boxes

Expansion of Pilot

- With the success of the pilot, seventeen more hotspots were purchased, this time for the Philadelphia campus through Verizon
- The Moultrie campus was also allotted devices from the two other campuses based on demand from a second survey
- Verizon's hotspots included a mobile device management (MDM) component, which allows the Public Services Librarian to set passwords for devices, get email notifications regarding usage and track the hotspot's location
- MobileBeacon also supplied an MDM component that enables us to block data to a device in the event it is lost or stolen



Results

- A post borrowing survey indicated initial responses were positive. Students were able to complete their work on time and few overages on data were noted
- In response to the success, hotspots have been sustained in the library's budget for next fiscal year, and there are plans to add five more devices to the Philadelphia campus inventory